

Serving in Turkey

Story by MAJ William Beckman

TURKEY is a young country, yet it lies on ancient land filled with historical significance. Her coasts and fields have seen armies come and go, inhabiting this crossroads of continents and cultures.

U.S. soldiers and their families have been stationed in Izmir, Turkey, since 1952, but in the spring of 2002 the Department of Defense decided to make assignments to Izmir 12-month unaccompanied tours. The decision greatly affected the small military community of around 900 Americans who live amid a bustling city of 3 million people.

Personnel issues were a major factor.

“We scrambled to ensure we were taking care of soldiers and their families,” said MAJ Ivery Taylor, chief of the military community’s manpower section. “We had to get assignments and orders for every soldier in the community within a few months.”

The transition process affected information systems analyst SSG John Sterling. “I was working on my bachelor’s degree and would have finished here, but we got a new assignment earlier than we planned.”

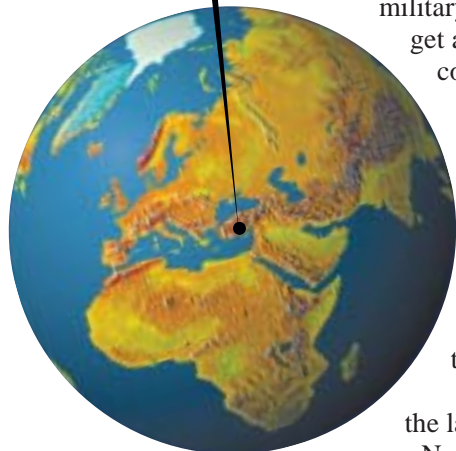
Some soldiers, such as administrative specialist SPC Cierra Boykin, sent their families back to the States before taking up their next assignments.

“My boy was in Turkish day care, learning the language and having an international experience. Now he’s with my mom in the United States, but we’ll be together again soon,” said Boykin.

Besides awaiting new assignments, soldiers had to work together to solve other issues. Soldiers and parents assisted in the closing of Izmir’s Department of Defense Dependent School, which had been accommodating the U.S. military’s children for 50 years.

In the fall of 2003 a smaller but more efficient exchange and commissary will move to a more secure area. Security and force protection were major concerns long before Sept. 11, said

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(Main photo) The Izmir area has tremendous off-duty opportunities, such as exploring ancient ruins, scuba diving or riding camels on the beaches.

(Below, left) U.S. soldiers are supported by a small commissary and base exchange, but most Americans quickly learn to navigate the bustling Turkish markets to find bargains.

(Below, center) Soldiers use off-duty time to ride along Izmir Bay.

(Below, right) SPC Cierra Boykin works alongside Turkish soldiers in the message center, ensuring Joint Command Southeast's multinational staff members get their mail and messages.





Army battalion commander LTC Steve Shappell. "Izmir has been in a heightened force protection status for more than 10 years."

The soldiers are vigilant, but lead normal lives. "I watch my back, but I'm comfortable here," said SGT Chad Mitchell, an information-systems analyst.

The threat level isn't high, because of the community. "The Turks are great. They have a great sense of hospitality and will really try to help you," said Sterling. "My kids and I felt safer here than we did in the States."

Given recent changes, what should a newly assigned soldier expect?

"I told my replacement to start filling out his extension paperwork," said Sterling. "I love it here and would have stayed longer because of the things Turkey has to offer."

Izmir and the surrounding areas are unusually appealing. The Aegean coast is beautiful and offers inexpensive resorts and a vibrant nightlife. There are also thousands of reminders of Turkey's ancient past. Within a few hours' ride, a soldier can visit hundreds of ancient Greek and Roman ruins, and the early Christian churches.

"In the States you only read or hear about this stuff, but here you can see where many of these things happened," said Boykin.

An Izmir assignment won't be the hardship that people envision with an unaccompanied tour. Instead of living in barracks, soldiers will be staying in leased quarters or apartments around town. Protecting the force means

Izmir, a sprawling western city of 3 million people, is home to some 170 U.S. soldiers who are part of NATO's Joint Command Southeast. The soldiers live in leased housing along Izmir Bay.

dispersing groups of soldiers and allowing them to keep a low profile.

The Army also no longer ships privately owned vehicles to Turkey. Soldiers will travel to work in civilian clothes on shuttle buses and then slip on their BDUs.

And while the infrastructure has changed, much will stay the same. Soldiers are part of the Joint Command Southeast, which is staffed by 10 NATO countries and is the easternmost NATO joint headquarters.

Sterling, along with 63 other soldiers, works to keep the headquarters in touch with the rest of the world. "We do everything, from maintaining the restricted and classified local-area networks in garrison, to setting up the computer systems when the headquarters deploys."

The multinational mission also hasn't changed. Twenty-seven countries belong to NATO's Partnership for Peace Program. Joint Command Southeast has established a working relationship with 16 of the nations, providing peace and stability to the region through communication and cooperation.

Geography plays a big role in this, because this secular but predominantly Muslim country borders Iran, Iraq and Syria, as well as nations that were once part of the Soviet Union.

U.S. soldiers are a vital part of this international partnership. In the last year they provided expertise and assistance to Azerbaijan, Bulgaria, Turkmenistan and Georgia.

The most recent example was a medical-assistance project in Tbilisi, Georgia, planned and led by MAJ John Casey.

"There are about 120,000 displaced people who fled from their homes nine years ago," said Casey. Most of the people live in poor neighborhoods, with little money and even less access to health care.

Casey organized a team of 23 medical personnel from nine countries. Over several days the team treated more than 2,000 patients and provided more than \$74,000 worth of medicine and equipment.

"To see the smiles on the kids' faces made all the work worthwhile," said Casey.

Whether they're supporting the garrison or deploying to faraway lands, U.S. soldiers will keep Joint Command Southeast on the leading edge of the partnership, Casey said. □

Did you know that...

- The Trojan Wars took place in Western Turkey.
- The oldest known human settlement is in Catalhoyuk, Turkey.
- Two of the seven wonders of the ancient world are in Ephesus and Halicarnassus, Turkey.
- St. Nicholas, also known as Santa Claus, was born in Demre, on Turkey's Mediterranean Coast.
- Turks introduced coffee to Europe.
- Turks gave the Dutch their famous tulips.
- Istanbul is the only city in the world built on two continents.
- Writing was first used by people in ancient Anatolia. The first clay tablets — in the ruins of Assyrian Karum — date back to 1950 B.C.
- The first Neolithic paintings found on man-made walls are in Catalhoyuk, on Turkey's Anatolian Plateau.
- Scholars believe the burial mound recently excavated near the village of Yassihoyuk, Turkey, is the tomb of King Midas.